A SPUNTERED NOVELLA

THE OTHE MINTHE MIRROR

A. G. HOWARD

A Splintered Novella

The Moth in the Mirror

A. G. Howard



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~ 1 ~ The Moth's Machinations

"You're sure about this, Morpheus?"

"I am," Morpheus answered, dragging off his gloves and tucking them into his jacket. "You, however, appear to need convincing." Magic tingled at his fingertips, a pulsing blue light just beneath the skin. Due to the iron bridge outside, his powers were limited to a few benign tricks. But it would be enough to get his point across if necessary.

The carpet beetle—who stood as high as Morpheus's collarbone after Morpheus had consumed a shrinking potion—gulped behind his many clicking mandibles. His carpeted hide quivered. "No, no. Please, you misinterpret my reservations." The insect's twiggy arms trembled as he flipped through the alphabetical tally on his clipboard of all the memories that had been lost in Wonderland. "It looks like a boring way to spend an afternoon, is all ... spying on a human's forgotten moments."

Morpheus shifted, and his wings cast a shadow over the beetle's face. "Ah, but this particular human has much to teach me."

This particular human had managed to capture something Morpheus desired above all else in the world.

"Have a seat"—the beetle pointed to a white vinyl chair—"and I'll ready the memories for you."

Morpheus swooped his wings aside, sat down, and took a drag from the hookah provided by his host as a courtesy. The sweet, candied tobacco seared his windpipe. He blew puffs of smoke, fashioning them into Alyssa's face. It was easy to picture the way her eyes always frosted to blue ice when she saw him, filled with both dread and excitement. He adored that about her: the sharpened edge of her netherling instincts, warning her not to trust him, softened by human emotions forged during their shared childhood.

Before her, he'd lived his life in solitude, never needing anyone. He had no idea what spell she'd cast over him. She was beyond frustrating, always pledging her devotion to the wrong side. But her charm was undeniable. Especially when she defied him or glared at him with righteous indignation. It brought the most delicious snarl to her lips.

Morpheus set aside the hookah, although the burning in his chest had nothing to do with smoke. Alyssa was the only one who could quench the fire there, for she was the one who had first stoked those flames.

They'd spent five years together—childhood playmates—until her mum ripped her from him, bloody and wounded, and he had to stew in remorse and guilt from a distance because of a foolhardy vow he'd made to stay away.

Being deprived of his friend gave him his first taste of loneliness. Even all the years he'd spent in a cocoon prior to ever meeting her, trapped and claustrophobic ... even they hadn't prepared him for the desolation of her absence.

Then at last she'd come back to him, reviving all the old feelings he thought he'd mastered. That time, too, was short-lived. She'd left again, by her own choice. The resulting pain and loneliness were excruciating. Debilitating.

She'd only been gone from Wonderland for six months, and he didn't understand this sick emptiness inside that could only be filled by her touch, her scent, her voice. Solitary fae had no use for such nonsense. They required no companionship, abhorred emotional baggage. Their affection and loyalty belonged to the wilds of Wonderland and to no one or nothing else.

So what had she done to him to change that?

Each time he saw his reflection of late, he no longer recognized the moth in the mirror. He was incomplete, broken; and he despised it.

Despised it even more because she made him work so bloody hard to woo her, while she gave her affections freely to a worthless mortal.

Morpheus suppressed a snarl. He couldn't make sense of Jebediah's luck, how a human could wield such power over a netherling queen. How a mere boy could harness a royal half-blood heart so multifaceted, a spirit

prone to pandemonium and madness. Jebediah was dragging Alyssa down, chaining her to the boredom and mundaneness of the human realm.

She must be set free.

Morpheus had considered killing his rival, but Alyssa would never forgive him. No. The time had come for creative measures.

If Morpheus knew what Jebediah had been thinking during his trek through Wonderland—all those times when the boy had been at his most terrified, his most discouraged—he would know the mortal's weaknesses and his strengths, *intimately*. He would see how to break Jebediah down, pit him against himself.

Those weaknesses would defeat him better than Morpheus could. Then, when he'd destroyed Alyssa's faith in her mortal knight, Morpheus would be there to comfort and win her.

He would once again hear her laugh the way she had when they were children, once again be the recipient of her dazzling smile.

Once again be complete.

"This way, please." The beetle motioned for Morpheus to follow.

Morpheus removed his hat and raked a hand through his hair. When the insect opened the door to a windowless memory compartment, the scent of almonds wafted from a plate of fresh-baked moonbeam cookies on an end table. A cream-colored chaise lounge was wedged against a wall, and an ornate brass floor lamp lit the space with a soft glow.

Morpheus's attention locked on the small stage across the compartment. His heartbeat thudded with anticipation, a deep and steady rhythm. Red velvet curtains waited to part at any moment, to play Jebediah's memories on a silver screen.

"Since you'll be riding in the boy's head to visit his lost memories," the beetle said, "I'm bound by policy to warn you ... Human emotions can be a powerful thing. They can make you see things in an entirely different light."

"I'm counting on that." Morpheus smirked. "Ever hear the saying about friends and enemies?"

The beetle scratched his shaggy hide. "Um ... keep your friends close and your enemies closer?"

Morpheus settled onto the cushioned lounge chair, smoothing his pinstriped pant legs as he crossed his ankles. "Even better to take a walk in your enemy's shoes. 'Tis the best way to control their footsteps. Or erase them altogether, should the opportunity arise."

The beetle, trembling again, punched a button on the wall with one spindly arm. The stage curtains opened, revealing a movie screen. "Picture the boy's face in your mind whilst staring at the empty screen, and you will experience his past as if it were today."

His spiel was rehearsed—mechanical, even—but Morpheus's pulse raced. He waited for the beetle to shut off the lamp. As soon as the insect had left the room and closed the door, Morpheus's body came apart at the seams—floating through the darkness as if he were made of dust motes. All the pieces reassembled themselves on the silver screen in vivid, cinematic colors, until he was inside Jebediah Holt's head, wearing his body, feeling his emotions.

In that moment, Morpheus gave himself over to the experience, seeing things as a human for the first time in his life.

~ 2 ~

Memory One: Kryptonite

Jeb woke up on a swinging bed.

He was naked. Why was he naked?

Before that fact could fully register, thirty or more moth-sized sprites dropped out of the air, caressing and whispering over every part of him. He tried to move his arms and legs. The sprites' wings—purring at the speed of hummingbirds'—released particles like dandelion fuzz that somehow immobilized him. The seeds gave off the scent of cinnamon and vanilla and flooded his consciousness until the room blurred.

When the fog lifted, he was at home in bed. Night spilled through the window, and Taelor straddled him, half dressed. French-manicured fingers trailed down the hairs of his chest and abdomen toward the waist of his jeans.

This couldn't be right. He and Taelor had had a fight before prom, had broken up.

He gently flipped her beneath him and propped himself up on his elbows, dragging the hair from her face. But Taelor's eyes didn't meet his. Alyssa's icy blue ones did—staring in dreamy, innocent wonder. His fingers grew fat and clumsy at her temples.

Al was in his bed?

No. This couldn't happen. Alyssa hadn't even kissed a guy yet. And Jeb had never been any girl's first anything.

Al was untouchable to him. She'd experienced enough turbulence in her life. And he wasn't exactly the poster child for stability.

Jerking his hands free, he rose to his knees.

"Jeb, don't you want me?" Al asked, rubbing a palm over his chest.

He couldn't answer. His fingers itched and felt stretchy, as if they were growing. He held them up in the moonlight, watching in horror as they fell

off one by one and morphed into caterpillars. The caterpillars then inched toward Alyssa, and he couldn't do a thing to stop them. He fell to the bed on his back, hands held above his face, staring in disbelief at the raw and bloody stumps where his fingers once were.

Screaming, Alyssa tried to scramble off the mattress, but the caterpillars caught her, creeping over her skin and spinning webs until only her wriggling form inside a cocoon remained.

"Let her go!" Jeb shouted. A light flashed across his eyes, and then he wasn't at home in his bed anymore. He was somewhere in Morpheus's mansion, and the sprites were rushing over his skin, hypnotizing him ... using some kind of hallucinogenic pheromones.

They're holding me hostage so Morpheus can be alone with Al. The instant that reality came crashing in, the spell broke.

Jeb tumbled off the swinging mattress and out of his captors' seductive mist. Snagging a pillow, he covered himself. "Give me something to wear!"

The sprites floated in midair, their dragonfly eyes watching him.

Several golden baskets sat on the floor at his feet. Jeb kicked one over. His tiny captors swooped around the room in mass hysterics.

Gossamer, Morpheus's prized sprite, appointed five of them to pick up the spilled strawberries. They counted the fruits one by one and placed them back in the container.

Jeb knocked over another basket, this one filled with beads of scented oil. Five more sprites dropped to the floor for cleanup, stopping to count each bead before putting it away.

Soon he'd overturned every basket. Some were full of flower petals, some with lotion, others with grapes. By tumbling them over, he'd managed to preoccupy most of his captors. Only Gossamer and two others still fluttered around his head.

"Give me something to wear," he repeated, "or I'll start ripping the feathers from the pillows. There aren't enough of you in here to clean up *that* mess."

"He's not responding to our allure," one of the sprites muttered to Gossamer, her coppery bug-eyes turned in Jeb's direction.

"Or our magic," the other one added with a pout. "I conjured some girl from his memories, but his subconscious broke through."

"Yes, this one is indeed a challenge," Gossamer agreed in a voice that tinkled like chimes. After sending the other two sprites to pick up the contents of the latest basket, she offered Jeb a silk robe.

He turned his back and shrugged the covering on, taking in his surroundings.

Morpheus had put him in an opulent prison. The room was round with black marble floors that reflected orange candlelight. He was already intimately acquainted with the focal point: a swinging, circular mattress attached to the center of the domed ceiling with gold chains. Furs and pillows cushioned the bed, perfumed with rose petals.

For all its comforts, this room was missing one very important aspect. An exit. There was no door, window, or any other opening in sight.

Convex walls—painted dark lavender—had grapevines stretching around their circumference, winding in and out of the plaster and entwining lit candelabras. Fruit blossomed on the vines. At random intervals the grapes would spontaneously burst and drizzle their juice into stone basins set all along the walls to catch it. From there, rich purple liquid drained into fountains—a constant supply of sweet-smelling fairy wine.

He vaguely remembered tasting the wine when he'd first arrived. Suspicious of it, he'd tried to resist, but he had been so thirsty. No telling what kind of magic was inside the liquid.

He groaned and rubbed his face. How long had he been drunk and bewitched? He'd made himself useless to Alyssa, just like his old man would've done.

"Where is she?" he asked, ignoring the self-playing harp behind him, which picked up volume, trying to muffle his voice. "Tell me what Morpheus is doing to her."

Minuscule, glittering, and confident, Gossamer settled on a satin pillow. She patted the mattress next to her and crossed her green ankles. "Perhaps you don't realize what we sprites are capable of. We've had centuries of practice. We can show you rapture the likes of which you've only dreamed about."

Jeb regarded her, head to toe, then tightened the satin belt at his waist. "Sorry. I don't dream in green."

He found Alyssa's backpack under the bed and dragged it out. He'd noticed something in there earlier when he'd been digging through it: a wrought iron bangle bracelet she'd probably tucked inside at school and forgotten about. He'd done his share of research on fairies when he first started painting them, and he knew they didn't like iron—if the lore was true.

He slammed the backpack onto the mattress. The fur blankets billowed like a huge wave and knocked Gossamer from her pillow. Kick-starting her wings, she landed lightly on Jeb's shoulder.

"If it is Alyssa who inspires your passions, we can fulfill that fantasy." Gossamer clapped her hands. The others left their cleaning posts and hovered in a circle around Jeb. A sick spasm knotted his gut as every sprite took on the likeness of Alyssa—miniature replicas complete with platinum hair and sexy skate-glam outfits. They released their pheromone seeds again, blinding him with Alyssa's nectar-sweet scent.

Swinging a pillow, he shattered the illusion and scattered the seeds. The sprites screeched and hid in the vines on the walls, their glowing bodies like strands of white twinkle lights.

Gossamer fluttered overhead, scowling. "Enough! Report to our master that the mortal is loyal to the girl. We cannot seduce him to return to his world without her."

Jeb cursed as the sprites wriggled through pea-sized holes in the wall where the grape vines wove in and out. If only he, too, could fit through those tiny exits. He gave a passing thought to using the shrinking drink in the backpack that he and Alyssa had found when they first arrived in Wonderland, but that would render him as small as his current captors, and he'd be powerless against Morpheus. Helplessness boiled in his gut, as deep as what he used to feel as a kid, hiding in a closet until his dad's rampages passed.

He clenched his teeth. There had to be a doorway hidden somewhere behind the vines. They'd brought him in here; there had to be a way out.

He took a running leap toward the closest wall and ripped some vines free, slinging them everywhere. Gossamer's tiny screech of surprise didn't faze him. Grapes burst in his hands, releasing their sticky, potent scent. The ropy plants cut into his fingers like wires. He embraced the pain. This was something he could control—unlike the torment of his old man's glowing cigarettes boring into his skin, or the fists pounding his face and gut. The scent of nicotine, the taste of blood. Imagined or not, they fed the savage in his soul.

He plunged into a red tunnel of rage and trashed the room. When he at last came back to himself and leaned against the bed, he was shocked at the havoc he'd wrought.

Out of breath and sweating, he nursed the bleeding cuts at the bends of his fingers and searched the debris for Gossamer. Had he hurt her? If so, maybe he really was his father's son.

Jeb clenched his hands, disgusted with himself. "Gossamer?" He flinched at the sound of his voice, gruff and raw with emotion.

A flicker of wings stirred on one of the chains suspending the bed from the ceiling. He exhaled, relieved to see the sprite. Though it seemed stupid to care, since he was about to try using Alyssa's iron bracelet against her.

Gossamer settled on the floor next to the torn vines and the baskets he'd overturned yet again. Her shoulders were slumped in defeat. She probably didn't know where to start counting all the spilled contents.

Jeb began digging through the backpack. The harp had stopped playing, and the silence taunted him like a clock's ticking hands. Every second he spent away from Alyssa left her more vulnerable to Morpheus.

Cold metal finally met his fingers. He tossed the iron bracelet toward Gossamer but a few inches wide, hoping to weaken her without harming her.

She screamed and skittered into the air. "Please ... put that away."

"Not until I get some answers." Jeb pinched one of her wings between his thumb and forefinger. He carried her to the bed and set her on a pillow, keeping the bracelet close enough to intimidate her. "Just cooperate, and I won't hurt you."

"It already hurts." She groaned, her greenish skin tinged turquoise. "Mustn't use my magic ..." She slapped her palms to her face. "Will make me ... hideous. *Abstain*." Her voice softened, as if she were speaking to

herself. "Abstain until the threat of pain and contamination are gone." She gritted her teeth.

Jeb frowned. "So iron turns your power against you? The perfect weapon to use against your boss."

"A piece that size ... will only work on the smallest of our kind."

Jeb bent over, holding the iron cuff closer to her. "Okay, then consider this a lie detector. Each time I sense you're holding out, the iron gets closer. Where is Al, and what's your creepy boss doing to her?"

The sprite's color changed to robin's egg blue. She rolled on the pillow, wings struggling to flutter. She pulled them over her shoulders and across her chest, as if to restrain her magic. "Your Alyssa is comfortable and cared for. Morpheus is watching over her as she sleeps ..."

Jeb snarled. Last night, *he'd* been the one watching her sleep, in the rowboat. He'd rolled her to face him so he could make her a promise, even if she was too drowsy to hear it. He'd promised to watch over her, to get her home safely. He wasn't about to break his word now.

He had to fight the urge to trash the room again. "How do I get out of here?"

"Only Morpheus has the means to open the doorway."

Jeb leaned forward, his nose almost touching Gossamer's face as he held the iron bracelet over her head like corrosive mistletoe. "You're saying I'm stuck here until that winged cockroach decides to let me out? He's going to make Al face Wonderland alone?"

She whimpered, laying a palm on her brow. "No. Since you've proved yourself so loyal, he will allow you to accompany her on her journey. You will attend his feast and make plans."

"Feast?"

"Alyssa's introduction. Morpheus wishes to put her on display to the others."

"What others?"

Gossamer slumped in a purple heap and scooted off her perch. She dragged something from inside the pillowcase—a sketch of Al that Jeb didn't remember making. Slowly, Gossamer drew up her knees and studied the lines. "You did this while you were under our spell. You have power

within your artist's heart—a light that can pierce any darkness. You've captured Alyssa's inner self perfectly."

"That sketch is pure fantasy," Jeb grumbled. He laid the iron cuff on the paper next to Gossamer.

She rolled to the middle of the drawing, trying to escape the metal. "There is more truth to this likeness of Alyssa than anything you can force me to say."

Jeb tugged at the picture, tumbling Gossamer and the iron bracelet onto the furs. He spread the sketch out on a pillow and traced the charcoal lines. This depiction was like all the other fairy drawings he'd made of Al over the years, but it couldn't be any more different from the girl he knew.

He'd drawn her with her hair pinned up. She never wore it that way. A black spaghetti-strapped gown flattered her curves. She wouldn't be caught dead in such a conventional dress. The only thing that looked like her were the lacy black fingerless gloves covering the scars on her palms.

Other than that, the drawing was a complete fabrication. Al was seated on a park bench. She held a rose. Mascara and tears streamed in graceful curls down her face. Come to think of it, it was similar to the way her makeup had looked the last time he saw her.

He still couldn't figure out why, after nearly drowning in an ocean of tears, her mascara hadn't washed away. Squinting, he studied the set of translucent wings spread behind her. The thin membranes shimmered in a single ray of sunlight slicing through the clouds. The wings made him uneasy, though he couldn't pinpoint why.

Maybe because they reminded him of Morpheus's wings, though a completely different color. Jeb's temples pounded. Nothing could be worse than her being alone with that bug man. The freak had some kind of hold on her, had gotten into her head when she was little. The subconscious could be very powerful, and if Morpheus still had access to Al's dreams ...

"How do I beat him?" Jeb asked over the knot in his throat.

Gossamer's bulging eyes turned up to his. She was too weak to crawl away from the iron cuff, which now nudged her thigh. "He will not be defeated. He's waited years for this day."

Jeb grimaced. "Okay, so he's Superman. But everyone has their kryptonite. Something they fear."

"Confinement," Gossamer blurted, darkening to the color of a bruise at the confession.

"What do you mean?"

Gossamer pressed the back of her hand to her forehead. "Please ... you're holding it too close ... the iron ... it's draining my energy."

Jeb fell back on the mattress and moved the cuff away from the sprite. Balancing it between his fingers, he studied the iron in the candlelight. It reminded him of his iron labret and the first time Al had seen it—her enthusiastic reaction. She'd begged to touch it, asking question after question about the process of getting a piercing. Her enthusiasm and naïveté. Her insecurities. Morpheus wouldn't hesitate to use any or all of them to manipulate her.

Jeb had to convince Al to leave Wonderland, to forget this quest to break the curse on her family, whatever it took. Something dark waited just around the corner for her, like in his dream. He could sense it looming.

"So, you want her to fix the original Alice's mistakes, right? What if *I* fix them instead?" Jeb tried reasoning. "You send Al home and let me take care of things."

"Impossible," Gossamer answered in a breathy whisper, her pale green color starting to return. Crawling toward the sketch, she ran a tiny palm along the rose. "She's already passed tests and proved she's the one."

"Tests? You mean like finding the rabbit hole to Wonderland and drying up the ocean of tears?"

She nodded.

"But I helped with those."

"She's the one he's waited for. Not you."

Jeb held the iron bracelet over her one last time. "What does he really want from her?"

Before Gossamer could answer, the domed ceiling started to shake. Pieces of plaster tumbled down in thick white chunks. Jeb held a pillow over his head and a palm over Gossamer to protect them from falling debris. The ceiling ripped at the seams, swinging the bed and pulling the chains in opposite directions so the mattress lifted several feet.

After the tremors stopped, Jeb glanced up. Morpheus's dark silhouette appeared in the jagged opening overhead.

Subtlety was low on this guy's priority list. "Anyone ever tell you you're a drama queen?" Jeb growled.

Morpheus leaned in low to glance at the messy room. "Anyone ever tell you you're a deplorable houseguest?"

His captor's grand entrance was partly responsible for the clutter, but Jeb bit his tongue, unwilling to risk his chance to see Al.

Morpheus eased back. "Alyssa awaits you in the mirrored hall. And, by all means, wash up and shave. You are to be introduced to our dinner guests as an Elfin Knight, so you need to look the part. Gossamer shall give you tips on proper behavior." Morpheus dropped in some clothes and boots. They hit the floor with a clump. "Here is the uniform." He paused and gestured to the chains. "Too bad you haven't any wings or netherling magic. You will have to climb your way out. And I can assure you, it won't be an easy trek."

Jeb's muscles tensed as Morpheus vanished from view; he knew the warning referred to so much more than his exit from this room.

Memory Two: Carnage

Jeb wiped sweat from his brow. Morpheus had been right about the climb out of his gilded prison being difficult. But that was nothing to the trek through Wonderland he and Alyssa had taken since then. The entire day had been one crazy challenge after another, with danger and death around every turn. And now he'd lost Al. They'd become separated just before accomplishing the final test. She was facing the Twid sisters' cemetery alone, and he was stuck here in the bottom of a chasm.

Night had fallen the instant he'd hit the ground—such a fast transition, it was as if someone had flipped a light switch.

The kinks in his muscles tightened. He hated the thought of Al being alone in this wacked-out world after dark. Then again, she'd proved herself strong enough to face almost anything. It had been she who'd ended up saving *him*, in more ways than one ...

He thought of how she'd looked—hovering overhead, glistening and wild, fluttering with the grace of a dragonfly. Seeing her sprout wings had been both terrifying and miraculous at once. He couldn't breathe while watching the transformation.

If he were honest, he still hadn't recovered his breath from when she had lowered him into the abyss and he'd shouted "You're my lifeline!" before she shot up higher into the sky. He shouldn't have put so much pressure on her to save him. He had to do what he could to get out of here himself—meet her halfway. Otherwise, she'd never forgive herself if something went wrong.

A jubjub bird's carcass had broken his fall. He wiped sticky goo from between his fingers onto his pants, turning up his nose at the rank remains of the army that had been chasing them and tumbled into the chasm. He pushed himself to stand in the pitch-dark gloom. His boots made sucking sounds as he walked. He'd never been squeamish; any aversion to blood

and gore had been beaten out of him—a gradual desensitization reinforced each time he'd look in the mirror to find his cheeks and eyes swollen up, fat and bloody like raw steak.

But without a speck of light to go by, the carnage at his feet felt more alive than dead. His imagination pulled out files on everything from zombie movies to demons and hauntings. Nausea burned his stomach. He took solace that only the wind whistled through the chasm. He couldn't hear any ghostly chains or undead moans.

Besides, time was the actual foe here, more dangerous than anything he could imagine. Al still had to complete the final task in the cemetery. And then they had to find each other again.

He forced himself blindly forward until his palm skimmed the chasm's wall. Before he'd dropped all the way down, he'd caught a glimpse of Al's backpack snagged on a rock outcropping about a yard north. If he could find it, he'd have a flashlight. Hands scraping the crusty surface of the stone, he lifted his feet over obstacles, patting his toes across corpses to assess how wide each step should stretch.

Rubbing the scrapes on his elbows, he studied the sky. A shy smattering of stars wrestled the clouds and broke through to dimly light his surroundings, enabling him to wend his way around the queen's dead army. A damp breeze spun dust like tiny tornados. It was going to rain. And in this place, it was possible it would literally rain cats and dogs—the hissing and barking variety.

A chill that had nothing to do with the impending storm crept across his soul and shadowed any humor he might've found in the thought. What was with all of Morpheus's "tests"? Each time Al successfully completed one, her netherling form became more prominent. Was the goal to alter her completely, so she couldn't go back to the human realm?

Strands of hair blew into his face, and he shoved them aside.

Morpheus had said that all he ever wanted was to return Alyssa to her proper place. Her *home*. Jeb had hoped that meant back to their world, the human realm. But what if Al didn't have a curse on her at all?

He remembered from his fairy research that there were creatures called changelings—the offspring of fairies secretly left in the place of stolen human babies. Had Al's great-great-great-grandmother, Alice Liddell, been

a changeling? Maybe that was how she'd found the rabbit hole as a child—by instinct. That would mean that this *was* Al's home, in some warped way.

Jeb shook off the speculations. They only dredged up more questions.

He'd reached the backpack. Opening it, he fished out the flashlight and flipped it on.

As he zipped up the bag, he brushed the landscape with swaths of light. The tattered guards looked like crumpled playing cards. Discarded playthings. Even the busted-up jubjub birds could pass as children's toys with the stuffing pulled out.

Backpack in place, Jeb walked the circumference of the chasm without finding any openings. Displaced rocks filled any possible passages he might've tried. He might as well have fallen into a giant tube. There was no way out other than up.

He pointed his light at the grassy perch some twenty stories above—the clearing where Alyssa had landed. He was determined to find her before Morpheus did, even if he had to scale the jutting rocks in the dark without a safety rope.

He'd no sooner wedged the flashlight in his mouth and banked his foot on a crag to boost himself up than a familiar British voice rang out.

"Get to it, men. We need an accurate head count before the Twid sisters send their pixie brigade to gather up the dead."

Morpheus.

Jeb stepped down and almost collided with the winged netherling who had appeared from out of nowhere—as if he'd unzipped the air and slipped through. Twenty to thirty Elfin Knights filed in behind him, carrying lanterns and wearing the same uniform as Jeb, though much less frayed and dirty. They strode by without giving Jeb a second glance, too intent on the body count.

"Well, hello, pseudo knight." Morpheus smirked.

Every part of Jeb itched to rip off his cocky grin and pound his face. But he was outnumbered. If he wanted to get out of this pit and find Al, he would have to play nice.

"I hate to say it, but it's good to see you, Sir Morphs-a-lot." Jeb tucked his flashlight away. "You took the mirror route, I see."

"Glass is the only way to travel." Morpheus held up his lantern and examined Jeb's ruined clothes. "For one, it's a bit kinder on the wardrobe. And I'll let you in on another secret. By keeping my wings on that side of the plane"—he pointed a thumb at his back, where half of his appendages weren't visible—"the opening stays accessible for our return trip."

Jeb forced a smile. "Good to know." *Perfect, in fact.* He could go back with this fairy troupe, then take the mirrored-hall express to find Al. He would have to distract Morpheus first, though—get his guard down. "So, is that a new hat?"

Morpheus practically beamed. "How kind of you to notice. It's my Insurrection Hat. I've ne'er had occasion to wear it until today." He flicked several of the scarlet moths that made up the garland on the hat's brim, then leaned forward and cupped Jeb's ear to muffle a secret. "Their red wings represent bloodshed," he whispered.

"Uh-huh." Jeb clenched his jaw at the unwelcome rush of warm breath along his earlobe. He glared at the knights, discernible only by their lanterns floating in the blackness behind him. "So you're planning a revolt with the Ivory Queen's army."

Morpheus squeezed Jeb's shoulder. "Always knew you were smarter than the average mortal."

Jeb's muscles twitched at the contact. "Which means you were just sending Al on a wild goose chase for your own entertainment." *Careful*. He couldn't let his distrust show. Not yet. Instead, he bent down to adjust his boot laces and took a deep breath before straightening.

Morpheus tightened his crimson necktie. "Every task I've asked of Alyssa has had a purpose." He stepped to one side as someone new slipped through the mirror portal—a dwarfish skeleton with antlers and glowing pink eyes, trussed up in a red waistcoat.

"Rabid White?" Jeb whispered in disbelief. None of this made sense. Rabid was from the Red Court. Why was he here?

"What's the report, then?" Morpheus crouched down close to Rabid's height, still keeping his wing tips tucked inside the invisible mirror portal.

The little netherling kneaded his gloved hands and glared up at Jeb, his bald head reflecting the soft shimmer of Morpheus's lantern. "One of us, are you?"

Morpheus smiled and answered for Jeb. "Of course he is. He helped our Alyssa conquer the big bad Red army, did he not?"

Scratching his left antler, Rabid nodded. "King Grenadine, neutralized be. At both the front and back gates, the castle guarded by regiments three and seven. Flanking the queen, a circle of five. And not to dismiss, the crown and its keeper."

"Ah, yes. The bandersnatch. Well, once Alyssa brings me her prize from the Twid sisters' cemetery, I'll have nothing more to fear from that wretched beast. You've done well, Sir White." Morpheus tipped his hat.

Rabid clicked his cadaverous ankles together and bowed, then gave Jeb a final piercing pink glare before he hopped back through the portal.

"He's your spy," Jeb mumbled, feeling like an idiot for not guessing that sooner.

"Yes."

"So all those times the little bonehead threatened Al, scared her lifeless, that was to uphold the appearance of loyalty to Queen Grenadine?"

"The best spies are the ones that play both sides with equal vigor."

Jeb studied the swinging lanterns in the distance. The squeaking of metal handles and the shuffling of boots eclipsed the wind's soft whine. "Okay. Since we're laying out all our cards—"

Morpheus's snort interrupted him. "What a delightfully fitting pun, considering where we stand." His lantern motioned to all the card-guard corpses.

Jeb ignored the morbid joke. "I was going to ask why Rabid turned against the Red Court."

"He was Queen Red's royal advisor during Alice's visit. He wants to see the true heir upon the throne almost as much as I do."

"True heir." Jeb kicked up a puff of dirt with one boot, his chest tight. "So all of this has been to dethrone Grenadine and make room for a new queen."

"Yes." The lantern glazed Morpheus's face in an expression of dreamy indulgence. "And we're so close. Soon she'll be on her throne, where she's always belonged. In her proper place."

Her proper place. A hypothesis formed in Jeb's mind, outrageous and incomprehensible yet somehow the obvious answer to all the questions earlier churning in his mind. Every question except one ...

"But first," Morpheus said with a dismissive sweep of his hand, "we have to be sure what we're up against when we raid the castle. You and Alyssa managed to take out quite a chunk of the opposition with your fancy footwork. We're here to assess if the numbers match up with the ones Rabid reported. We must ensure that Grenadine doesn't have any cards hidden up her sleeve." He slapped Jeb on the back. "See what I did there? 'Cards up her sleeve'?" He chuckled.

Jeb didn't crack a smile.

"Oh, come now. She has cards for guards. 'Tis a pun, like the one you made earlier, but much more clever."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it." Jeb scowled.

Morpheus's smile faded. "You're not a very fun date."

"Don't you ever take anything seriously?" Jeb gritted out. "Al's in danger out there."

"Nonsense. She's gloriously capable! Did you not see her fly earlier? Of course you did! You were dangling at the end of her chain." Morpheus swung his lantern over his head in celebratory sweeps. "Wasn't she a vision, coming into her own? Just like a fairy princess." He gave Jeb a sly glance. "Don't you agree?"

Fairy princess. There it was, out of Morpheus's own mouth, mocking Jeb for not realizing it from the very beginning. Jeb clenched his hands on the backpack straps to keep from jamming a fist into Morpheus's larynx.

Morpheus set his lantern down, then fished silver gloves out of his lapel. "Don't feel slighted, mortal knight. Your contribution did not go unnoticed. And I always repay my debts. So I'll be taking you out of this gulley of death in demonstration of my gratitude."

"You can thank me by letting me help Al," Jeb managed, vocal cords tight. "She'll finish her assignment a lot faster with me at her side." If he could get to her, maybe they could hide from Morpheus in the Twid sisters' cemetery together until they figured a way out of this.

"Sorry," Morpheus said, pulling on the gloves as he motioned the Elfin Knights back over. "She needs to do this on her own. You shall see her soon

enough; we'll all be reunited. One big happy family."

"No!" Jeb's control ripped loose. He lunged, but the elves were too fast and restrained him, fingers biting into his wounded elbows. "Just let her leave Wonderland, you son of a bug—"

Morpheus pressed a finger to Jeb's mouth. "Ah, ah, ah. Already used that one."

Jeb jerked his head back, leaving the netherling's finger hanging in midair.

The jewels at the edges of Morpheus's tattoos darkened to the color of dried blood in the lantern light. "Now, now. Is that any way to treat your rescuer?" He pouted. "Besides, how can I let Alyssa go if I don't *have* her? She was entering the garden of souls, last I heard. But once she's finished there, she'll find me. She has a very important role yet to play."

"Right. Because *she's* the heir to the throne." Jeb listened, incredulous, to his own words echo as if they'd slipped from someone else's mouth. "I don't know how, but it's her."

"Oh, ho!" Morpheus applauded. "Do you see what I told you, brethren knights?" Glancing over Jeb's shoulders at the elves, Morpheus patted his chest atop his red necktie, as if overwhelmed with emotion. "Smarter than the average mortal. Too bad he still has all the physical limitations of one."

"Doesn't matter," Jeb snarled. "She's out of your reach." He tugged against the elves, but there were too many holding him. "She must be inside the cemetery by now, and you can't force her to do anything. You said it yourself—the Twids won't let you in."

"True enough. But she'll find her way to the castle on her own. The moment she realizes I hold captive the one thing she treasures above all else in the world, she'll come crawling to me, wings in tow." Morpheus raised a hand in some sort of signal.

The Elfin Knights released Jeb. He spun on his heel and flung his backpack at them, scattering the group like bowling pins. Throwing out a fist, he cuffed Morpheus's forehead and unbalanced him. One of the knights scrambled into place to maintain the mirror's opening. Before Jeb could catapult after him and leap through, blue crackles of lightning snagged his skin and clothes like static electricity. They dragged him around, controlling

him like a marionette until he faced Morpheus once more. The lightning was coming from the netherling's fingertips.

Morpheus moved closer.

Jeb tried to step back, but his muscles shut down—paralyzed.

"Sleep," Morpheus said simply, and he laid a blue-glowing palm on Jeb's head. A pulse of light swept through Jeb. He tasted something sweet, like honey and milk, then smelled the scent of lavender. Fingers cinched in the silky weave of Morpheus's shirt, Jeb struggled to stay awake. But the light was too comforting ... too soft ... too warm. Against his will, his eyelids grew heavy, and he fell to the ground, sound asleep.

~ 4 ~

Memory Three: Caged

Jeb's skull throbbed, and blood drizzled from his hairline into his eyes.

He swiped away the stickiness to focus on his surroundings. Morpheus had brought him to the Red Castle after putting the sleeping spell on him. Dumped him inside a birdcage in the dungeon. Jeb wished he hadn't drunk the shrinking liquid when he woke up, but the bug man had given him an ultimatum.

At first, he'd threatened to kill Al. But Jeb had called that bluff, knowing she was indispensable. Then Morpheus had pulled out another big gun, threatening to send Al's fragile mom completely over the edge of sanity. That he *would* do.

Al had fought so hard to save her mother. It would kill her to lose her to madness. So Jeb didn't hesitate putting the bottle to his lips.

His body swayed, but it wasn't from the woozy aftereffects of the potion. The platform beneath him was swinging from his attempts to headbutt his way through his prison's bars—a desperate move that had resulted in nothing more than the gash at his hairline. A piece of Morpheus's magic—a blue electrical thread—held the wire door of the birdcage immovably shut.

"Well, plenty of good that did, yes?" a nagging female voice intoned. "Morpheus chooses who has the power to coax his magic loose. Obviously, you're not a chosen one."

Jeb grimaced at his fellow captive. She was a lory—a parakeetlike netherling normally the size of a human. Since they'd both been shrunk, the only thing that set her apart from the birds in his world were the robes of creamy satin and red jacquard fitted over her wings, body, and bird legs, and her humanoid face slapped onto crimson feathers as if it were a mask. A beak that was more like a rhinoceros's horn jabbed at him from where a nose should have been, and her lips flapped furiously.

Worst of all, her voice could topple the Tower of Pisa with one syllable. Whenever she spoke, it was as if someone had surgically implanted speakers in Jeb's ears and locked the volume dials on "deafer than a stone statue." She was one of the many reasons he'd been trying so hard to get out of this bird prison.

Flickering light from the candles on the wall outside the cage illuminated her scowl and cast the rest of the dungeon into shadow.

"Listen, *Lorina*," Jeb said after her voice stopped echoing. "We wouldn't be in here if it weren't for your husband." He pointed to the creature snoring below the cage, who was just as strange-looking as his wife, with the body of a dodo, the head of a man, and hands protruding from the tips of his stubby wings. "He kept Alice Liddell in a cage just like this one all those years ago. It's his fault my girlfriend has what it takes to dethrone your queen. Did it ever occur to you that this is what you both had coming?"

"Charlie did no such thing!" shrieked the lory, fluttering in midair in the cage. "Did it ever occur to *you* that Morpheus is a brass-faced liar?"

Only every minute of every hour. Jeb leaned against the bars. His knees gave out, weakened by his efforts to strong-arm the wire bars with every available muscle. He clunked to the metallic floor, nudging a browning pear slice sitting on its side like a small couch. The cage was an impregnable fort in his miniature state. But it didn't matter. The bars could've been made of uncooked spaghetti, and he still wouldn't be able to help Al. Even if he escaped, at this size he couldn't take on anyone.

Charlie, Lorina's dodo husband, wasn't much help. He was bound in iron cuffs and manacles, napping against a wall. Though the birdcage hung on a peg just inches above the dodo's head, there was nothing Charlie could do about it.

Morpheus must've treated the giant birdman to the same sleeping spell he'd cast on Jeb earlier, though Charlie was starting to come out of it.

Lorina settled on the perch in the center of the cage, swinging over Jeb's head like an acrobat on a trapeze. Her face flamed as fiery as her feathers, which caused the red spade and heart stenciled on her cheeks to fade in comparison. "Since we're to be exiled in this urine-stenched facility," she bellowed, "you shall have plenty of time to hear the truth."

Jeb rubbed his head to ease the splitting ache. "If you could take your voice down about two decibels, I'd appreciate it."

"Take my voice down?"

"Augh." Jeb cradled his face in his hands.

The miniature trapeze squeaked with each swing, adding to the noise pollution. "For your information, my queen adores the sound of my voice. Praises it, in fact."

The dodo's snoring paused, and he smacked his lips. "That would be because she stops her ears with beeswax, O Loveliest of Lunatics."

"Fat liar," Lorina snapped, rocking her swing so fast, Jeb thought he might get seasick.

"I'm wearing iron chains," Charlie said on the tail end of a yawn. "I haven't the strength to lie." Then he dropped back off to sleep.

That seemed to shut Lorina up, at least temporarily.

Jeb took advantage of the silence to think. Morpheus must have told Al about her true lineage by now, about what was expected of her. She must be so shocked ... so terrified. Jeb ached to hold her, to the point that his chest felt like an anvil sat on it.

That moth freak should've told her the truth from the beginning. She would never have chosen to stay. But Morpheus had known that, so he'd tricked her under the pretense that she could cure a curse on her bloodline. Jeb wanted to pluck off Morpheus's black wings and stuff them down his throat for misleading her, because there was no cure for family, as he knew only too well.

"It was Red who put Alice in a cage." The lory was off and running again. "Not Charlie."

"But your husband chose to keep her caged," Jeb inserted against his better judgment. He plugged his ears for the booming rebuttal, but Lorina only sighed.

"No. Charlie tried to do the right thing by the girl," she said, considerably softer now. "He planned to send Alice back to the human realm behind Red's back, but the queen found out and dragged them to a cave in the highest cliffs of Wonderland's wilds, without any of us knowing. She left Charlie with her victim, so she could enact her master plan, knowing Alice would be tended by a captive who could never escape.

Because, of course, dodos can't fly. She stole my husband from me for years. He was a prisoner, just like the mortal was."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, Birdie."

A flurry of dust-scented wings, jacquard, and satin dropped down and attacked him. "You will show respect and listen!"

Jeb held up his hands in self-defense. "All right. Sheesh. I'll listen." It wasn't like there was anything else he could do. Morpheus had told him that as soon as Alyssa was crowned queen, she could open the portal to the human realm. Whether Jeb believed that or not, he couldn't do anything other than hope. He had no power here. That knowledge gnawed at his insides with each passing minute.

Settled in front of Jeb atop a mountain of lush fabric, the lory looked through the bars and grumbled to her sleeping husband, "Worthless old fezzerjub. Leave me to do all your defending. Don't know why I ever married you."

The dodo snorted and murmured sleepily, "Because marrying the court jester was the only way you could have a spot in the Red Court, O Darling of Dirges." The snoring resumed.

"See how well that turned out," she grumped, her rouged, heart-shaped lips pouting beneath the curl of her beak. "Bony little Rabid and his black heart of stone." She preened the feathers on the back of her neck and tucked a sequined net around them.

Jeb reached over to retrieve the thimbleful of water their captor had left next to the pear slice. It was the size of a large coffee mug in his hands. He handed it off to his cellmate, who took it with her wings and gulped some down.

"Tell me something, Lori. If what you say is true ..." Reading the defensiveness on her beaked face, he rephrased his question to save his ears. "Since you've chosen to share your side of the story, maybe you could tell me what role *Morpheus* played in Alice's captivity."

She patted water droplets from her lips. "He played no role at all. He was very fond of Alice and would've done anything to see her safely home. But the same hour he offered her advice as a caterpillar—warning her to avoid Queen Red's castle at all costs—his metamorphosis came over him.

When he emerged, fully transformed, and learned what had become of Alice, he was furious."

"You're trying to tell me he actually has a conscience?"

"He did where Alice was concerned." The lory adjusted the regal robe that kept slipping from her lack of shoulders. "Morpheus used all his resources as a solitary fae and finally found her and my husband hidden away in the caves of the highest cliffs of Wonderland. Alas, it was too late for Alice by that time." Lorina returned the thimble to Jeb, half full now.

Jeb sat up straighter, causing the cage to rock. "So why does he want to help Queen Red get another queen on the throne, when he should hate her for putting Alice in a cage for all those years?"

"Mayhap he's angry that Grenadine didn't try to find Alice herself once the child was captured. But Grenadine lost her memory ribbon and forgot about the child."

"A good ruler would've had more than one ribbon to remind her, would've made sure everyone and everything was in its place."

"My queen is a good ruler!"

Jeb winced at the ear-splitting roar.

The dodo's snores stopped. "My vociferous wife speaks the truth, lad. Morpheus appears to be holding a grudge for what he perceives as neglect, even if it was simply an oversight."

Jeb shook his head at all the holes in everyone's reasoning. "No. There's more to this than that."

"You have good instincts, mortal knight."

Jeb perked up at the tinkling voice. A glowing light floated through the small window in the dungeon's heavy wooden door. Jeb stood and gripped the birdcage bars, angling his head to get a better look.

Gossamer.

The little sprite fluttered over and whispered something to the magical blue thread fixed around the wire door, letting herself inside the cage. The thread tied itself into a knot again after she'd reattached the latch behind her.

She sparkled like the lit fuse on a Roman candle as she hovered in place, studying Jeb with a sympathetic expression.

Since they were now the same size, she brought to mind a painting Jeb once saw by a Czech artist, Viktor Olivia. He was most famous for his depiction of a fairy who seduced men into getting drunk on absinthe. Gossamer embodied that creature: a woman's perfect form, dusted green and naked with glistening scales covering her like a string bikini.

He had sensed when he left the mirrored hall that she was on his and Alyssa's side.

"You came to help," he said, hopeful.

A copper key, the same color as her eyes and almost the full length of her torso, swung from her neck. Her gaze dropped to her dainty feet, as if she were battling herself. "I would've been here sooner, but Morpheus is always watching in the looking glass. Now that he's with Alyssa, preparing her for her coronation, he will be too busy to keep an eye on the rest of us ... until the end."

"The end?" Jeb gripped the bar next to her, intent on her dragonfly gaze. "You have to tell me—everything."

The sprite glared at Lorina, who'd been inching toward the wire door. "You well know you haven't the power to leave this cage unless I open it for you."

Huffing, the lory fluttered up to the trapeze again.

Gossamer led Jeb to the pear slice, and they both sat down. The fruity scent overpowered the stench of the dungeon and calmed him enough to hear her out.

Gossamer curled her hands over Jeb's where they rested on his clamped knees. "I've already betrayed my master enough by being here, and his wrath will be great. All I can say is that, within the hour, Alyssa will be forever indentured—tethered to Wonderland for all eternity. Morpheus has planned all along to send you back, mortal knight ... but without her."

A vein in Jeb's temple began to writhe like a snake on a hot plate. He leapt up and banged his head on the bars again, trying to shake loose the taunting blue thread, unable to control the helpless fury boiling through him. More blood dripped along his temple. "You have to get me out! I've got to stop this!"

"Yes, yes! Us, too!" the dodo and his wife piped up. "We must help Queen Grenadine keep her crown!"

"Of course," Gossamer said, grasping Jeb's hand to drag him back next to her. "You will all be given the chance to fight for your loyalties."

"But I can't fight like this." Jeb kicked a pear seed the size of his foot. "Did you bring an amplifying pastry?"

"No. It is not the strength of your body that will save Alyssa, but the strength of your artist's heart. Though I can assure you, you won't be leaving this place in your present form."

The lory dropped down from her perch and scowled at the sprite. "Now, you listen here, little mimsy silverfish. This boy has no part to play. He's secondary at best. I am the queen's handmaid, and Charlie is the court jester. We should be your priority. We're honored members of the royal court, the only ones who can put a stop to this travesty!"

Accelerating her wings to a misty blur, Gossamer floated and placed her hands on her hips. "For *your* part, Lorina, you can unlock your husband's chains, as I need to speak to the mortal alone and have little tolerance for iron." She opened the cage's door and handed off the key.

The lory went fluttering out in a flurry of flamboyance and ill temperament.

"Come, come, Sweetness of Savagery," Charlie encouraged his wife as she fluttered all around him, bouncing up and down, unable to maintain altitude. "Hurry, would you? The iron is stinging. Oh, really! It's not so very hard ... do try again!"

Lorina's face fired even redder. "You try using a key the same size as your head with a wing tip, flufflesnot! Some of us weren't blessed with fingers, you know."

While the couple was preoccupied, Gossamer sat next to Jeb again.

"You said my artist's heart can save Alyssa," he whispered. "In the room at Morpheus's mansion, too ... you said I have power within my artist's heart—a light that can pierce any darkness. My girlfriend is about to be dead to me and her family. It doesn't get any darker than that." Frustrated tears singed the corners of his eyes.

"Would you die for her, mortal knight?"

Jeb's spine stiffened. In the past, each time he'd protected Alyssa, he'd just jumped in without a thought. *Would he die for her?*

When his dad was killed in an accident, it was Alyssa who saved him. He couldn't believe he'd ever considered living in London without her. He needed her, every day. Her understanding smile, the way she made his scars feel like medals of valor under her touch, and her incredible eyes. Even though she'd seen just as much disappointment in her life as he had, there was a light inside her that never dimmed. And not only did it make her beautiful on the outside, but that same light allowed her to bring life to the incredible mosaics she made.

It was that light—both inner and outer—that had driven him to sketch and paint her over and over again.

He looked at Gossamer, hardly able to contain his emotions now that they'd been given an outlet. "She's my best friend." *My muse, my brush, my artistry, my heart. All of it's dead without her.* "I love her." Scrubbing his face, he smeared the moisture that had crept from his eyes along his cheeks. "Yes, I would die for her. Is that what I have to do?"

The sprite stared back, unblinking. "Are you willing to go beyond death? To be lost to everyone, even yourself, in a place where memories wash away on a tide as dark as ink? For in order to free Alyssa, you will have to take the Ivory Queen's place in the jabberlock box where she's trapped."

Jeb pictured the dark water in the box he'd seen in the mirrored hall at Morpheus's mansion—the ghostly head inside—and his heartbeat stumbled. Self-preservation kicked in, his mind racing to find another way. But in the deepest part of him, he knew there was no alternative, and time was running out for Al. His only regret was that he wouldn't get to tell her how he felt just once with his own voice before it was locked away forever. "I'll do it."

"And so you shall." Gossamer stood and held out her arms. Weak and numb, Jeb stepped into her embrace. She clung tightly and flew him out of the cage, landing them on the floor. "The mortal has agreed to be your kingdom's hero." She fired the words at Lorina. "See that you honor his bravery."

Lorina had managed to unlock her husband. She sat upon his shoulder, fanning herself with a wing. Wide-eyed, she nodded in silence—the most heartfelt accolade she could've offered. The dodo knelt beside Jeb, a huge

feathery presence. "We are forever in your debt, lad. What can we do to help?"

Gossamer pointed to a far corner of the dungeon, where a burlap blanket covered a cot, draping down to the floor. "Bring me what's beneath that bed."

Jeb watched, numbed by a mixture of disbelief and dread as the dodo carried over the jabberlock box.

Lorina gaped. "Morpheus had Ivory hidden down here?"

Gossamer nodded. "Upon Rabid's suggestion. He said this was the one place in the castle that no one would search for her."

After asking Charlie to open the lid and arrange a stone for them to stand on so they could see within, Gossamer dismissed the strange couple to a far corner of the dungeon for privacy.

Jeb stroked the white velvet roses flocked along the outside of the box, mesmerized by Ivory's beautiful face as it bobbed to the surface. Her haunted, crystallized gaze slid from him to the sprite and back again—cautiously curious. He shuddered at the thought of taking her place.

Did he really have to do this?

He felt Gossamer watching his profile. "I must ask one last time if you're sure," she said. "For, you see, since you are *choosing* to be locked within and sealing the choice with your blood, the box will never let you out. No one can save you. You're signing away your eternity for Ivory, a queen you don't even know."

Jeb gulped a knot from his throat. "No. I'm *trading* my eternity for Al's."

Gossamer smiled tenderly. "I once saw in your dreams your fear of not being good enough for the girl. After such a sacrifice, no one could ever question your worth as a man, or your love for her." She kissed his cheek, leaving warmth that trickled into his heart and managed to melt a small portion of the icy terror there.

Gossamer handed him a paintbrush and drew back. "Now, use the power only you can wield. Paint the roses with your blood."

Dizziness rushed over him. He mumbled ... senseless, fearful things ... agonized words that he knew would be his last.

Then he channeled all the anger, terror, and longing for a future he would never have into the sweep and sway of the brush. He stained each snow-white blossom red until he lost himself within of the shadows of his work, and became one with his masterpiece.

The Moth's Resolution

The scene stretched and blurred as Morpheus was dragged out of Jebediah's memories and deposited back into the chaise lounge. Darkness weighed heavily upon the room, yet he didn't budge to turn on the lamp. The pitch-black surroundings seemed to suit the murky thoughts in his head.

He ran a thumb along his thigh, tracing the ridges of the pin-striped fabric and smoothing the wrinkles.

Why was he feeling so out of sorts? He'd found exactly what he'd hoped to find. Jebediah's weaknesses had been there for the taking: a rage that could easily be coaxed out and manipulated, a sense of worthlessness fed by a violent and critical father, a jealousy that evoked a reckless protectiveness—even at the expense of his own life.

What Morpheus hadn't expected to find, however, was how similar he and the boy were. The demons from Jebediah's tormented past were not unlike his own. He'd often found himself jealous of humans ... having never had a father or mother's tenderness. He also empathized with the fear that he might never know completely another's trust and affection, based solely on his place in the world.

Although, in the past, Morpheus had never considered that a bad thing. He'd enjoyed being a reclusive and self-reliant soul. At times he was vainglorious, of course, when it suited him to be the center of attention. But attention, affection, or trust weren't things he *needed*. Not until Alyssa came along. When she chose to ignore him, he couldn't function ... felt bumbling and incompetent.

And now, after standing in Jebediah's shoes, Morpheus understood more than he wanted to about how the human side of Alyssa worked. Although one half of her had wings and could float past trivial, mortal insecurities, the other half of her was grounded and craved what any human would crave: reassurance and reliability. Having seen Jebediah's courage, ingenuity, and loyalty to Alyssa firsthand, Morpheus knew without a doubt that that was exactly what the boy was offering her: a safety net of emotion that would keep her from ever falling too hard.

No wonder she was so captivated by him. No wonder he held her in his thrall. Hell, Morpheus himself was morbidly fascinated by the boy's honorable traits, unusual in a human so damaged. Morpheus was tempted to step back and let Jebediah have his moment of happiness. Some might even say he'd earned it by being willing to give up his future, his memories, his life for Alyssa.

Morpheus growled and slumped forward, hands clenched, trying to lighten the unfamiliar weight upon his chest. It wasn't as if the boy would be around forever. He was mortal. Someday he would die of old age, at the very least, and Alyssa would be fair game once more.

Fair game.

Morpheus's jaw twitched. Romance wasn't fair. Nor was it a game. It was war. And, as on any other battlefield, compassion and mercy had no place there.

The carpet beetle had been right. Human emotions were unpredictable and powerful things. They'd gotten into Morpheus's head, weakened his resolve.

Elbows on his knees, he held his palms up, unable to see even their silhouette in the darkness. He conjured a small strain of magic to gather at his fingertips in plasma electric balls the size of peas, then coaxed the orbs through every corner of the room, trailing blue lightning like static electricity. They climbed the walls before gathering together in the form of a woman. The light pulsed hypnotically.

Imagining Jebediah with Alyssa, showing her the ways of love, taming her savage spirit with his common human conventions, scalded Morpheus's throat with a bitter tang of envy.

He didn't want her wildness to be subdued by any other man, didn't wish to share any part of her. He wanted both sides: her innocence and her defiant spirit.

Where was the excitement in dependability? Where was the spontaneity in a predictable world? He could offer her an eternity of challenges and

passion, of quiet, tender moments stolen in the depths of riotous flames and ravaging storms—tranquility amidst the chaos.

She belonged with *him*, wearing regal robes. He had so much to teach her about the nether realm, about the glories of manipulation and madness. If he fed her gluttonous netherling side, her human insecurities and inhibitions would fade and, in time, vanish altogether. She would no longer crave Jebediah's safe love.

Morpheus called his magic back, reeling in the coils of blue light until he was surrounded by darkness once more. His wings swept the floor as he stood. He lifted them high in a determined arc that nearly touched the ceiling.

No more deliberating. He'd tried to do the *fair* thing in past instances, and, without fail, it always came back to haunt him. He could suppress the twinge of guilt stirring in his chest, but he could not give up his needs for Jebediah's. He would never be himself again without Alyssa by his side—the flame to his moth. He wouldn't stop until she was back where she belonged, in Wonderland.

To win, he would fight dirty, reap the spoils of her heart by any means necessary, no matter what it cost the mortal boy. It was the netherling way, after all. To do any less would make Morpheus human. And he knew, now more than ever, that that was the last thing he ever wanted to be.

Alyssa's story begins in Splintered, available now



And the madness continues in *Unhinged*, on sale January 2014



"Fans of dark fantasy, as well as of Carroll's Alice in all her revisionings (especially Tim Burton's), will find a lot to love in this compelling and imaginative novel."

-BCCB, starred review

"The story's creepiness is intriguing as horror, and its hypnotic tone and setting, at the intersection of madness and creativity, should sweep readers down the rabbit hole."

-Publishers Weekly

"A deft, complex metamorphosis of this children's fantasy made more enticing by competing romantic interests, a psychedelic setting, and more mad violence than its original."

-Booklist

"These adventures are indeed wonderful."

-BookPage

About the Author

A. G. Howard wrote *Splintered* while working at a school library. She always wondered what would've happened if Alice had grown up and the subtle creepiness of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland had taken center stage in her story, and she hopes her darker and funkier tribute to Carroll will inspire readers to seek out the stories that won her heart as a child. She lives in Amarillo, Texas.